Reflection Paper

“Forum”—Creating Centrality for Alamar
by Promoting Self-Employment

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01 As Complex Projects—From Complexity to Simplicity

As we all know, the Complex Projects studio has a specific methodology as a research-based studio. The studio encourages students to explore the complex factors that might affect the decisions made by architects. By collecting and analyzing data, the complexity of social and spatial character has been discovered, as a strong preparation for generating the following intention. In this process, architecture is considered to be not only a entity, but also a outcome of diverse tangible and intangible factors. Thus, students in Complex Projects studio are required to play not only the role of architect, but also the role of data analyst as well as organizer. In this stage, the complexity is increased. Based on the diverse information found in first stage, setting out the strategy of urban development and architecture design is a very important step in Complex Projects studio. By formulating the strategy as urban planner and strategist, the data collected needs to be filtered and concluded to form the starting point of design, which also gives the principles in the entire design process. With the development of design, the simplicity is achieved in place of complexity.

To conclude, in my personal opinion, the objective of Complex Projects is to achieve the final result of Simplicity with the method of Complexity.

In the thesis, I focused on the research area Alamar, Havana in Cuba, and investigated it in social, economic and social scopes, as well as spatial character. Based on the group manifesto of urban development, the second stage is to concentrate on specific research topic of creating the Centrality with Self-employment for Alamar as a real city in the future. The third stage is to solve the investigated spatial and social problems with architecture to answer the
research questions, from urban scale 1:1000 into building scale 1:200 and then the human scale. Last but not the least, the analysis of social value and future development is an essential step to review the rationality of the project. The methodology of Complex Projects studio and principle of achieving simplicity with complexity were carried out throughout the whole process.

02 Methodology

02.01 Diachronic & Synchronic Principle
Architects should observe the world in both diachronic and synchronic perspectives, especially in this case, Cuba, a changing context. On one hand, the economy, culture, politics, as well as urban space in Cuba are of great importance to comprehend what the situation is. On the other hand, it is also necessary to be acquainted with the past, present and the development of Cuba, in order to ensure the project will be in accordance with Alamar and Cuba’s future.

For instance, self-employment in Cuba was legalized in 1993 as a part of a series of liberation to reduce state sector and increase non-state sector economy in response to the USSR collapse. In the beginning, the self-employment has
caused considerable controversy, which can explains the fluctuations in the numbers. However, generally speaking, the self-employment is becoming increasingly popular in Cuban society. In 2010, the end of central planning and paternalism was officially announced in Cuba. It can be seen that the growth of self-employment is an unstoppable trend now, and even in future.

Additionally, the design itself should also be considered in an approach of development. What is the best urban strategy in next 10 years, 20 years, or even 50 year? What should be the best way to react not only to today’s Alamar but also to Alamar in the future? What is the best approach to design the hardware but leave the flexibility to people in Alamar to alter the software, in order to meet their developing needs? What is the sustainable way to construct the building in terms of structure and energy? All these concerns should be taken into account when we want to build the project to provide strong starting point for people in Alamar.

02.02 Vernacular and Global Evaluation

After Revolution, the Cuban economy in central planning model relied on USSR from 1960s. Meanwhile, the US started the embargo against Cuba. As a result, the Cuban economy has suffered billions of damage, which created a
great difficulty for its development in infrastructure and public facility. Public space and projects are in shortage and decay.

On one hand, it is important to know the situation and development of Cuban architecture and urban space. On the other hand, many excellent projects in Latin-American and Caribbean countries, such as Mexico, Brazil, Costa Rica, who share the similar geography and climate, can provide useful experience of updating urban space and infrastructure. Besides, because the similar experience on social and economic development, Cuba share construction technology and materials with other developing countries in this area. They have the similar way of dealing Caribbean sunlight and rainstorm, as well as ventilation and drainage.
03 Centrality—Research & Design Concern

03.01 Project Thesis
The thesis is “FORUM” Creating Centrality for Alamar Community By Promoting Self-Employment in Alamar. Specifically speaking, the main research question is:

- How does Alamar community realize its unexplored centrality with self-employment, as a response to its homogeneity and fragmentation, in order to provide itself the strong basis for future development?

- How does Alamar position itself and define its future in today’s Cuban context? (Urban)

- By what means can the Alamar community obtain a strong and well-functioned community public realm, as a starting point of the further development of the whole Area? (Architecture)

- How does the project react to the Cuban context, such as local material, construction method, and social involvement, etc? and create public space of high-quality for Alamar people? (Technology and Atmosphere)

Thus, I propose a large-scale interventions—“FORUM”, operating at the scale of community infrastructure, providing a pilot building and a new spatial order for urban center where learning and self-employing as the central organizer of community life. The “FORUM” contains spaces for living, learning and working appropriate to the lives of self-employers in Alamar. More than a means for gentrification, my proposal is to expand the model of self-employment as social and economic propulsion to Alamar people who are often excluded from the contemporary labor market in Cuba.

03.02 Between Centrality & Self-employment
The ambition of the project is to build the link between Alamar and Cuba as well as the link between present and future. Centrality is the goal to be achieved in Alamar with the content of self-employment.
This diagram shows the relationship between Centrality and Self-employment in the thesis project. On one hand, by promoting self-employment in Alamar, social function will be integrated to create and update its public space and realm. Secondly, the economy and wealth will grow to improve their living standard. Last but not the least, the density can be increased in the central area to reduce its homogeneity. As a consequence, the centrality of Alamar will be realized by self-employment.

On the other hand, Realizing centrality in Alamar will help to improve the hardware—public space and infrastructure, as well as the software—knowledge, skills and experience of employment and enterprise.

03.03 Hybrid, Mixed-use Development—Realizing Centrality

‘The Unit Building, covering three blocks of ground space, will house a whole industry and its auxiliary businesses. Only elevator shafts and stairways reach the street level. The first ten floors house stores, theaters and clubs. Above them is the industry to which the Building is devoted. Workers live on the upper floors…’

Rem Koolhaas. Delirious New York. 1978

The research area, Alamar, a New Town to the east of Havana, originally destined to become a luxurious American-style suburb. Villas were built in 20s which is stopped by the revolution. Castro’s policy was to replace the projected
building of villa’s with that of prefab apartment blocks for the workers, built by microbrigades\(^1\). Today, wide-spreading social housing is the main characteristic of Alamar. Due to the financial and economic shortage, the public function were not well-equipped. As a result, The failing to embrace multiple social functions results in the segregation and therefore the fragmentation of the city.

The mono-functional approach seems to be economical and problem-oriented, but the disability of social function costs much more once it is built. In response, the “FORUM” project plays a significant role spatially and socially in terms of urban strategies. The hybrid project goes beyond the domain of architecture and enters the realm of urban planning. Socially speaking, the hybrid building looks for unpredictable, unexpected relationships, encourages coexistence of public and privacy. The sociability of public life and the intimacy of private life find anchors of development in the hybrid building. Hence, the social relationship and network is enriched by hybrid social life. The hybrid of uses is only a part of the whole urban hybridization. Within this process, the property and land development can be hybrid; the construction can be hybrid; the management can be hybrid as well.

\(^1\) The concept of the Microbrigades was first put forward in public by Fidel Castro in one of his speeches in 1970. The workers within an office, a factory or any other productive unit should be given the possibility to build houses for themselves and for their colleagues.
Besides, by creating a hybrid complex in the geographic centre, the permeability of the hybrid makes it accessible from the city and the private use of its services extends its vitality to 24 hours a day. Consequently, the activity is constant and not limited by private and public rhythms. A full-time building is crucial for creating urban centrality.

Additionally, viable communities are those which are constituted in balance—residential, commercial, institutional, and operative. The abundant illegal additional construction of residential buildings in Alamar is a evidence of imbalance. A new type of hybrid housing is needed.

*Every Businessman in the city must have realized what an advantage it would be to live in the Building where his office is located. It is towards this ideal that real estate firms and architects should work.*


Density is another crucial factor of the centrality. The hybrid situation of land use is helpful to create dense urban environment. “The hybrid scheme proposes intense environments of cross fertilization, which mix known genotypes and create genetic allies to improve living conditions and revitalize their surrounding environment.”
Self-Employment in Cuba was legalized in September 1993 as a part of liberations that the Cuban government has adopted in response to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The reduction of state sector payrolls and the expansion of employment in the emerging non-state sector has been one of the principal policy measures implemented by the Cuban government to transform the country’s socialist economic model. The end of central planning and excessive paternalism in labor practices was officially announced in 2010, when Cuban authorities recognized the urgent necessity to transform the structure and composition of the country’s labor market.

What can be seen is that a new class of better-off Cubans has arisen as a result of the legalization of the dollar and the new opportunities for self-employment. They earn significantly greater incomes than state workers; they are generally well-educated; and they are important actors in Cuban’s economy. Their improved purchasing power has stimulated the Cuban economy. More importantly, they provide a first-hand glimpse of what average Cubans can achieve when granted the economic freedom.

When a transition towards a true free market economy occurs in Cuba, the self-employed will be an important minority of Cubans who have enterprise experience, who are familiar with risk taking, investment and regulation. They will be uniquely equipped to thrive in a capitalist setting. That is why I would like to take advantage of it to serve as the tool and content of the centrality in Alamar.

The projects provides an adaptable and hybrid form of self-employment education as essential for preparing new generations of self-employers for increasingly open economy in contemporary Cuba. A simple social contract is at the centre of my proposal: the first generation of self-employers, or people who are well-skilled to be potential self-employers, are provided better housing in the “FORUM”, as the fresh troops for realizing the centrality and gentrification in Alamar. Then, they could serve as the educator in Alamar community to provide and share their knowledge and experience in multiple models based on the community library and self-employment learning center. Consequently,
people in Alamar will be able to expand their knowledge and businesses, hire other people, and generate real wealth. Alamar is expected to develop into a real city.